

Bob Feller Pitches Opening Day No-Hitter

Stuns White Sox in April 1940

www.bobfellermuseum.org

by Dr. David Fletcher

Feller had been in the AL for four years by the time opening day 1940 began. He baffled hitters with his repertoire of pitches and crafty changes of speed. His curveball was particularly unfriendly to right-handed hitters. The pitch sped at a right-handed batter before dropping down toward the strike zone. To further confuse and trip-up hitters, Feller used a variety of windups - ranging from overhand to "three-quarters" to sidearm.



Photo courtesy: Baseball in Wartime
(baseballinwartime.com)

FELLER BEATS WHITE SOX IN NO-HIT GAME, 1-0 / *HEMSLEY DRIVES IN CLEVELAND'S RUN WITH TRIPLE*, wrote Ed Burns in the "Chicago Daily Tribune" the day after Feller's opening day no-hitter. "It was a treat day yesterday for baseball rejoicing or brooding, according to the mood and the inspiration. What would you do on a rainy, cold day if you were just over having participated on the winning side of a no-hit season opener," he continued.

Feller remembers that his arm was sore before pitching on opening day 1940, which turned out to be one of his best years. He had pitched two days before in an exhibition game in Cleveland against the Giants. "I never pitched well in the spring," he said.

In his 1947 autobiography, "Strikeout Story," ghost-written by Frank Gibbons of the Cleveland Press, he noted that, "I can honestly say that I have pitched many better games...I was lucky that day and I got fine support."

"Bobby Feller, the 21-year-old miracle boy from Van Meter, IA, pitched a no-hit game yesterday and the Cleveland Indians won the season opener from the White Sox, 1-0," blared the papers the next day.

A mere 14,000 fans ventured to old Comiskey Park to watch the White Sox's season opener, including Feller's parents and sister and Commissioner Landis.

"It was very cold and windy. My arm was stiff," remembered Feller, who was a bit wild in the game and ended up with 5 walks. He did record 8 strikeouts. The temperature was in the mid-30s and the wind howled off of Lake Michigan.

The wind played tricks with Feller's curveball and he relied almost exclusively on his hard stuff. He had trouble throwing strikes throughout the game. He was almost removed from the game by Manager Oscar Vitt in the second inning.

The White Sox had loaded the bases. Right-fielder Taft 'Taffy' Wright had reached second base with one out after an error by center-fielder Roy Weatherly, who misjudged the ball in the windy conditions (Feller concedes that he got the benefit of the doubt from Ed Burns (1872-1963) of the "Chicago Tribune" who served as the

official scorer). Feller got the next batter Eric McNair out on strikes but walked Mike Tresh and Sox pitcher Edgar Smith.

With a Cleveland pitcher warming up in the bullpen, Feller struck out Sox rookie third-baseman Bob Kennedy. When interviewed in 2008, 68 years later, he could not remember who was warming up in the Cleveland bullpen though he had vivid recollections of the game, the location of his pitches as well as key plays.

The first two innings took 48 minutes due to Feller's early wildness.

In the fourth inning, Cleveland scratched out the game's only run. With one out, left-fielder Jeff Heath (Feller's roommate) singled through the left side of the infield. After third baseman Ken Keltner flied out, catcher Rollie Hemsley hit a triple which right-fielder Wright misplayed, allowing Heath to score.

When the White Sox came up in the bottom of the fourth, Feller set them down in order. By the end of the eighth inning, he had retired 15 consecutive batters. Like most no-hitters, this game featured key defensive gems to salvage the no-hitter.

With the Indians hanging on to a 1-0 lead, Feller faced the heart of Chicago's lineup in the bottom of the ninth inning. He opened the ninth by easily retiring center-fielder Mike Kreevich and left-fielder Moose Solters.

He faced future Hall of Famer Luke Appling to be the possible final out and seal his no-hitter. Appling battled him hard and fouled off four pitches down the right-field line. The count was 3-2 and Feller was tiring; he had already thrown Appling nine pitches. Feller admitted in 2008, that he ended up intentionally walking Appling with an outside ball to keep the no-hitter bid alive. With Appling dancing off first base, Feller faced the White Sox's left-handed-hitting right-fielder Taffy Wright.

With the potential tying run on first base, Feller could not direct all of his attention to Wright. Feller had to keep an eye on the swift-footed Appling, who was edging off of first, trying to distract Feller and steal second.

On the first pitch, Wright smashed a hot grounder toward right-field that looked like it would break up the no-hitter. Amazingly, second-baseman Ray Mack (born Raymond Mlckovsky, a native Clevelander who was a star fullback for Case School of Applied Science) raced to short right-field, dove to his knees, grabbed the ball and tossed it to first baseman Hal Trosky. Wright was edged out by a half a step to end the game and earn Feller his first career no-hitter and baseball's only Opening Day gem.

"The real hero of the Chicago game must always be Mack...I can still see Mack racing to his left, out on the grass, in pursuit of the ball. He slipped a little as he came up with it," remembered Feller. "Wright's ball was the hardest hit off me all day. It was really tagged."

Even though the home team lost, White Sox fans rewarded Feller with a rousing standing ovation: it had been 23 years since the Chicago White Sox had been no-hit at home. Not since May 6, 1917, when Robert Groom of the St. Louis Browns no-hit the White Sox 3-0 at Comiskey, had the Pale Hose bats been silenced.

After the game, Feller says he posed with his manager Vitt and catcher Hemsley on the dug-out steps with famous baseball photographer George Brace. The clubhouse celebration was laced with levity and even featured Reverend Charles Fix, Feller's

pastor at the Methodist Church in Van Meter, IA. He fielded questions after the game at the Hotel Del Prado.

Feller was given a conquering hero's welcome when he came back to Cleveland and had 7,000 fans and a uniformed band waiting for him at the Union Terminal. Later that day, he went to St. Luke's Hospital (the same hospital this author was born in 1954) and visited Indians fan Paul Hauschulz, Jr. of Canton, who was sick with a strep throat and mastoiditis but rallied after listening to Feller's no-hitter over the White Sox.

A ball pitched by Bob Feller during his first of three career no-hitters, a 1-0 victory over Chicago on Opening Day 1940, is on display this spring as part of the 'Baseball as America' traveling exhibit in Philadelphia, PA. Vist www.baseballasamerica.org for the tour schedule.

Bob Feller's Opening Day No Hitter
April 16, 1940 - Comiskey Park

| INDIANS (1) | ab | r | h | WHITE SOX (0) | ab | r | h |
|--------------|----|---|---|---------------|----|---|---|
| Bodreau ss | 4 | 0 | 0 | Kennedy 3b | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| Weatherly cf | 4 | 0 | 1 | Kuhel 1b | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| Chapman rf | 3 | 0 | 0 | Kreevich cf | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| Trosky 1b | 4 | 0 | 0 | Solters lf | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| Heath lf | 4 | 1 | 1 | Appling ss | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| Keltner 3b | 4 | 0 | 1 | Wright rf | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| Hemsley c | 4 | 0 | 2 | McNair 2b | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| Mack 2b | 4 | 0 | 1 | Tresh c | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Feller | 3 | 0 | 0 | Smith p | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Totals | 37 | 1 | 6 | a-Rosenthal p | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| | | | | Brown p | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | | | | Totals | 28 | 0 | 0 |

a-batted for Smith in the 8th.

BATTING: 2B - Mack. 3B - Hemsley. RBI - Hemsley.
Team LOB - Indians, 7 White Sox, 6.

SB Kuhel. DP: 1 (Kuhel - unassisted).

INDIANS - 000 001 000 -- 1 6 0
WHITE SOX - 000 000 000 -- 0 0 0

| INDIANS | ip | h | r | er | bb | so |
|-----------------|----|---|---|----|----|----|
| Feller (W, 1-0) | 9 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 8 |

| WHITE SOX | ip | h | r | er | bb | so |
|---------------|----|---|---|----|----|----|
| Smith (L 0-1) | 8 | 6 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 5 |
| Brown | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

Umpires - Geisel, McGowan and Kolls.
T-2:24. Att-14,000.

Scorer Ed Burns